

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Valley of Dry Bones

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10 years ago, I flew to Peru and hiked the Inca trail to Machu Picchu with my son Parker - epic adventure. One of the hardest hikes I've done simply because of the elevation. As we trekked through Dead Woman's Pass I get this throbbing headache because of oxygen deprivation. At 14,000 feet the atmosphere has 37% less oxygen than when our guide pulls out a can of pure oxygen, and I inhaled a few times. As I breathe in that pure oxygen headache was gone in a matter of minutes. Can I tell you what I'm believing for? This is not a message this is a prayer that I've been praying for you. I'm asking God to open a can of pure oxygen and fill your lungs and fill your life with the Holy Spirit. I'm praying that God would heal a few headaches. Would you pray a simple prayer right now? It's only three words, but it has the potential to revolutionize your life. Here it is - Come Holy Spirit. If you pray it, and mean it it's game on.

Right now, wherever you are, I want you to take a deep breath and let it out. When you take a deep breath, it has a biological effect it promotes blood flow to the rest of the body. It also has a physiological effect. It calms nerves, it alleviates anxiety. It enhances attention span and it relieves pain. This is who the Holy Spirit is; this is what the Holy Spirit does. The Holy Spirit calms our nerves. This is where our holy competence comes from. The Holy Spirit alleviates anxiety. He is the peace that passes understanding. The Holy Spirit enhances attention span, way beyond what we could ask or imagine and the Holy Spirit relieves pain. He is our counselor, he is our comforter, he is an ever present help in time of need. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you. And by the way, long before you woke up this morning, long after you go to sleep tonight Spirit of God is interceding for you with groanings that can't even be formulated into. Now come on, that ought to relieve a headache or two.

This weekend we venture into the valley of dry bones. If you have a Bible, you can meet me in Ezekiel 37. Let me set the scene; the book of Ezekiel written around 571 BC, written to Jewish refugees in Babylon. A few years before the Babylonians had conquered the city of Jerusalem pilfered the temple, and profaned everything that the Jewish people called holy. Ezekiel is writing to these prisoners of war, who feel like God abandoned them. And I get it, I've been there but here's the irony. When we feel like God has turned his back on us sometimes it's because we have turned our back on God. We go our own way and then we wonder where God went. God didn't go anywhere. His goodness and mercy it's following you all the days of your life. And if you would turn around, you would find God with his arms wide open. Long story short, the Jewish people had profaned God with their idolatry long before Nebuchadnezzar pilfered the temple. This is when God sends them in an eccentric prophet named Ezekiel. Now I say eccentric because he once preached a sermon by lying on his left side for 390 days. And you thought my sermons were long.

Ezekiel, one of the major prophets, one of the latter prophets, and I'll be honest, first 24 chapters, tough read Ezekiel is rebuking the Jewish people. But I will say this; we don't need false prophets who say what our itching ears want to hear. The people I appreciate and respect are the people who say what needs to be said they care enough to confront. They speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but they speak the truth in love and that's key. By the way, the more you care about what people about you, the less able you are to love

them; the less you care about what people think about you, the more you're able to love them. I hope that makes sense.

Now, about halfway through the book, it's almost like Ezekiel flips the script. His name literally means 'God strengthens' and he lives up to his name. He starts speaking life, and love and hope and help. And that's where we pick up the story in Ezekiel 37.

Now, let me back up the bus just a little bit, and I want to give us an on ramp to the valley of dry bones. For what it's worth the Bible wasn't divided into chapters and verses until the 16th century. It was a French printer and scholar named Robert Estienne who thought it would be a lot easier to navigate the Bible if it was broken into chapters and verses. Totally agree plus, made John 3:16 signs possible. Now that said sometimes those chapter divisions create a false construct. We compartmentalize in ways that the original writers never intended. Second Timothy 2:15 says, "*Study to show yourself approved to God*". How? "*Rightly dividing the word of truth*". All of that to say this, I'm grateful for chapters and verses but let's not create partitions in the texts that weren't intended to be there.

On July 2, 2016, we were in a series called 'Mountains Move'. We were putting this principle into practice and I felt prompted to pray a brave prayer. Now I had prayed it hundreds of times before, but I felt like I needed to pray it again. I asked God to heal my asthma and something unbelievable happen. God healed my asthma. I had asthma for 40 years; I slept with an inhaler under my pillow. I played basketball with an inhaler in my sock. There weren't 40 days in 40 years that I didn't take multiple puffs of my rescue inhaler. Now I won't get into the details, but at some point enough is enough. I spoke to the asthma and the asthma went away. I'm 1,480 days asthma free, inhaler free. Now I want to be careful right here. This is not name it claim it. We don't get God on our terms on our timeline. Every prayer has to pass a twofold litmus test has to be in the will of God and for the glory of God. But there does come a moment when enough is enough when you've got to activate faith and speak to the mountain in your life.

So, we'll get to the valley of dry bones but I want to begin in the mountains in chapter 36. The Lord says to Ezekiel, "*Prophesy to the mountains of Israel*" He says this several times. Now let me state the obvious. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to an inanimate object. Now generally speaking, people who talk to inanimate objects sit by themselves, not a whole lot of friends, right? Not normal! Normal is overrated. At some point in your life, if you're going to break the bad habit, if you're going to overcome the addiction, if you're going to achieve the goal if you're going to restore the relationship if you're going to solve the problem, at some point, you have to stop talking to God about the mountains in your life and start talking to the mountains about God. You have to prophesy his promises, his power, his love, his grace, his truth. Jesus said it this way, "*If you have faith, as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain move from here to there, and it will move.*" Faith turns mountains into mole hills.

Now, I love this story in the Gospels. When a storm hits the Sea of Galilee and the disciples are scared to death which is saying something because they were professional fishermen, spent half of their life on the open seas. What does Jesus do? He stands up in the boat, which had to be a balancing act to begin with, and he rebukes the storm with three words, "*Peace, be still.*" The disciples have seen him do so many miracles but sometimes it's hardest to believe God in an area of our expertise, why? It's the place where we're self sufficient. It's the place where we think we have it figured out; where we think we have it under control. The more you know; sometimes

the harder it is to unlearn some of those assumptions. I think for the disciples, that was the Sea of Galilee. For the disciples, this is the jaw drop moment. I love what they say, *"Even the wind and the waves obey Him"*. In Christ you can tell mountains to move, in Christ you can tell storms to be still you have that kind of authority. Jesus said, *"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."* Again, gotta be in the will of God and for the glory of God but if it is game on.

14 years ago, we prophesied to a crack house, and it became Ebenezer's Coffee House. Three years ago, we prophesied to an abandoned apartment building and it became the DC Dream Center. We prophesied to inanimate objects, to brick and mortar, to dilapidated pieces of property and look what the Lord has done. Is there a mountain that needs to move? Is there a storm that needs to be stilled? Would you pray a brave prayer right now?

Alright, verse eight says, *"But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel."* God promises fruitfulness where there was baroness. Now, let me say this, if you want God to do the super, you have to do the natural. I think one of the most fascinating miracles in the Gospels is Jesus, cursing the barren fig tree. Every other miracle brings life, this miracle brings death. What is a barren fig tree? It's anything that isn't producing fruit.

I think all of us have discovered some barren fig trees during this COVID-19 crisis. There are some things that you put down, that you need not pick back up. You've got a curse the barren fig tree; you have to participate in the miracle. This promise and Ezekiel reminds me of the prophet Joel. He said, *"I will restore to you the years that the locusts has stolen."* It reminds me of the prophet Jeremiah, *"I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you."* Reminds me of the Prophet Zephaniah who said, *"For every trouble, I will render double."*

Now, I love those promises but let me interrupt this regularly scheduled sermon with a lesson in hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, science of interpreting scripture and the most basic principle may be this one; text without context is pre text. Well, what does that mean? It means that these books were written, these promises were given to very specific people in very specific situations. We don't get to pick and choose God's promises like pin the tail on the donkey. We have to carefully consider the original context historical, geographical, cultural that is part and parcel of rightly dividing the word of truth. Now, having said that, I will say this, let's not pin the tail on the donkey but let's connect the dots. II Corinthians 1:20, *"No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes", in Christ."*

Estimates range from 3,573 to 5,467 promises honestly doesn't matter how many. Why? Because all of those promises are "Yes", in Christ. But the verse doesn't end there. It says, *"Through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God."* You have to add the "Amen". How? By exercising your faith. How? By telling mountains to move, by telling the storm to be still, by telling water to turn into wine, by telling Lazarus to come forth. In math, this would be called the transitive property. If A equals B and B equals C, then A equals C. The C in this equation is Christ. In Christ, we are grafted into covenant relationship with God, and we gain access to all of the promises that go with it.

Let me give you an Old Testament example. Joshua 1:3 says, *"I will give you everywhere you set your foot."* In August of 1996 I'm reading that verse and Holy Spirit quickens that verse to my spirit. I feel this prompting to pray a perimeter all the way around Capitol Hill. Now, I wasn't praying for property. I was praying for people. Here we are more than two decades later, and we own half a dozen properties on that prayer circle, including a

city block that is now our Capitol Hill campus. That is not coincidence. That is providence; we bound on earth what was bound in heaven. Now, I know some people would say, Mark, that promise wasn't for you, it was for Joshua. I get that but the promise wasn't actually for Joshua it was for Moses. God says, *"Just as I promised Moses"*. So, it's the transitive property at play. We've got to be careful. But I don't think our issue is over believing the promises of God I think it's unbelieving. The God who watches over his word to perform it Jeremiah 1:12. Is there a promise you need to stand on, or kneel on or add the amen to? Would you pray a brave prayer?

Alright with that as a backdrop, I want us to venture into this valley of dry bones. Verse one, *"The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones."* Verse three, *"He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord God, only you know.'" He said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'O you dry bones, hear the word of the Lord'."* Ezekiel has already prophesied to the mountains now he prophesies to dead bones. Now, I'm not sure which is more impossible, mountains are huge, dead bones are dead.

Question - What does he prophesy? He prophesied the word of the Lord. This is so critical. I'm filming this message in my office right above Ebenezer's Coffee House and occasionally we'll have customers come in and ask about the bookstore upstairs. Not a bookstore, just my office with a few thousand of my best friends. I love books but there is a difference between these books and THE BOOK. These books are dead trees, THE BOOK, the Bible, is living and active. Hebrews 4:12, *"For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any double edged sword, it pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, it judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* You don't just read the Bible, the Bible reads you. The same spirit that inspired the original writers inspires us as readers. How? Psalm 119:25. The Psalmist says, *"Quickened me, according to thy word."* That's what happened the day that I read Joshua 1:3.

Now that word Quicken in the Hebrew language means to catalyze as in chemistry. It means to take possession, as in deed of transfer. It means to sustain life, as in ventilator. It means to conceive as in... well, we'll leave that one there. Finally, it can mean mouth to mouth resuscitation. When the Spirit quickens it brings dead things back to life. As we read and pray and meditate on God's word God resurrects us. He does surgery on our souls.

Verse five, *"I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live."* There is this shaking and trembling in rattling as these bones come together, flesh comes upon them, skin covers them, but there is still no breath in them. Then the Lord says, *"Come from the four winds, oh breath and breathe upon these dry bones."* This is a flashback to the book of Genesis, in the beginning; God breathed into the dust Adam becomes a living being. It's the Hebrew word ruach. It can be translated breath or spirit or both. Bottom line - in Him, we live and move and have our being.

After God healed my asthma I started researching anything and everything related to respiration. Not sure how this theory eluded me through three seminary degrees, but it forever changed the way I think about the 23,000 breaths we take every day. In Judaism, the name of God was too sacred to be pronounced. In fact, it was spelled without the vowels, that part I knew. What I didn't know is that some Hebrew scholars believe that the name of God, Yahweh without the vowels is synonymous with the sound of breathing. If that's true, then the name of God is too scared to be pronounced, but it's actually whispered 23,000 times every single day. It's our first word, our last word, and every word in between.

Verse 12, *"Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I will open your grave and cause you to come up out of them'."* In verse five, there's a flashback to creation. Verse 12, is a flash forward to the resurrection. It's a foreshadowing of Jesus speaking to dead bones and saying, Lazarus, come forth. It's a picture of what Jesus does in each one of us. Over time pieces of our personality die, so do our dreams, the enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy.

John 10:10, But, Jesus said, *"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly"*. Would you receive that life today? It's as simple as accepting the invitation Jesus extended 2,000 years ago. He said, *"Follow me"*. If you turn around, you're going to find the heavenly father with his arms wide open. Would you turn around today? If that's you? If you're at our online campus, would you just raise your hand? You'll see a little button right there. We want to help you take that next step in your spiritual journey. You'll see a link NCC.re/followJesus.

Let me close it this in Numbers 11. Moses sets up the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, he gathers 70 elders and God says, *"I'm going to take the spirit that's on you and put it on them."* And when he does, it's like the day of Pentecost. These elders start prophesying the praises of God. And there's this subplot to the story that, I think is a picture of what God is doing right now. Two men remain in the camp Eldad in Medad and there are differing opinions on why they stayed in the camp. One rabbinic tradition says that they did not consider themselves worthy. Whatever the reason, they stayed in the camp, they were physically distanced, they were sheltered in place. Guess what, that doesn't keep the Holy Spirit from falling on them, like he did the 78 and they start prophesying in the camp in their own tent. Here's what I find fascinating about this story. God sets up a structure, sets up a system, it's called the Tent of Meeting, we call it the church. He instructs the elders to gather at the tent outside the camp, then God moves outside the system outside the structure that he himself set up. We need systems we need structures, but we dare not box God in by boxing God out. Listen, God can move in an upper room. God could move in your room right now right where you are. The Spirit of God can show up anywhere, anytime. Anyhow, all you have to do is say, Come, Holy Spirit. Would you invite him right now?

Now, here's the irony of this story. Joshua actually tries to shut it down. Eldad and Medad don't have credentials. They aren't ordained. They can't celebrate communion at home. They can't baptize their own kids. They can't lead their family in prayer that's Moses job. No. God turns the whole thing inside out and upside down maybe God is doing it all over again. We often benedict by saying when you leave this place, you don't leave the presence of God you take the presence of God with you wherever you go. Do you believe that or not?

The text explicitly says that Joshua was the minister of Moses. I think he's trying to protect his turf, protect his territory. Moses says, *"Are you envious for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets."* I don't care who you are. I don't care what you do, you are a prophet. The Jewish rabbis didn't believe that the prophetic gifting was reserved for a select few. They believed it was for everybody. In fact, they believed it was evidence of spiritual maturity. The more you grow, the more prophetic you become. 1 Corinthians 14 says, *"Follow the way of love and eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy."* Love, plus prophecy equals game on. That's when and how and where God's kingdom is going to come. That's when and where and how God's will is going to be done. You are the only Bible some people will ever read, but I'm going to take it a step further. You are the only prophet that some people will ever encounter. What is a prophet? It's just someone in whom the Spirit of God is working, and speaking and sealing and healing and revealing and convicting and comforting. It's someone who speaks words of strengthening, comforting and encouragement with the Holy Spirit's help. The Holy Spirit wants to breathe on you right now. The Holy Spirit wants to breathe in you right now. But the Holy Spirit also wants to

breathe through you. In John 20:20, Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, receive the Holy Spirit. Would you let him breathe on you and in you and through you? In Jesus name, Amen